Analysis

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Introduction

Overwatch has become more than a site for competitive gaming, taking on new meaning through the fan-based actions and the depiction of the characters in the game. Specifically, I want to analyze how the female characters within this game are stereotyped and how the female body is hyper sexualized through the division of characters, gendered differences, and even racial tropes. Although the game has never caught mainstream media, it is a hub for analytical analysis from the perspective of the male gaze and procedural rhetoric.

The Division of Characters

Support

In Overwatch the division of characters spans between three categories. First there are the support characters, these characters are primarily behind the line of battle, healing the tanks and damaging players throughout the "battles". In order to be a successful support player, you must stay away from the front lines of battle, and hide in the back while being protected by the damage and tank players. Gendered roles within the classification of 'support' is the main argument I want to make within this section. Historically, "from the perspective of gender differences, girls face more oppressive approaches and are expected to behave submissively, be more easy going, compiler, relational, and show their emotions more deeply compared to their male peers" (Saygan, 1). The 'support' role reinforces the historical context of gender roles, by literally providing support to the team. In direct reference to Saygan, support players provide healing and are submissive, in terms of staying in the back lines of the 'attack'. Women historically are seen as caretakers and nurturing, this stereotype is also apparent within the support role, as the most used term for this role is 'healers'. Characters like Mercy, a woman

who is displayed with wings almost like an angel, is a prime example of historical stereotypes within the support class. Her character has an option to use a weapon, a tiny pistol that does little to no damage, but her main tool is a wand that automatically heals characters around her. Mercy is also a character with the ability to fly to the aid of her teammates. If a player is low on health, Mercy can make ‘latch on’ to a player. This system makes Mercy players to constantly look up and follow her teammate around to protect them, of course while she stays shielded behind them. Her slim visual silhouette is directly centered in all her allies' field of vision while she does this however. Her gameplay is a risk/reward structure where the risk only falls on Mercy herself. This mechanically reinforces the visual comfort of her character, while Mercy herself becomes a self sacrificing caretaker. She also has the ability to revive players who have fallen, but cannot revive herself. On the contrary, Baptiste is a male support character who carries a burst assault rifle which lets him heal, while also giving the option to defend himself if needed. However, Ana, a female support character, carries a sniper that allows her to also do healing and damage, but the sniper she carries limits her ability to play front line. Although both characters in this instance are granted the ability to do both damage and heal, the stark difference is the positioning of where these characters can be. Baptiste’s character is given more freedom in being able to play behind the line of attack, as well as mixing up with joining the front lines for battle, while Ana must stay behind the tanks / damage players in order to stay alive due to the long range sniper she is granted. This again reinforces the stereotype of submissiveness within the support category. The historical stereotype that women belong at home is also displayed within the support category. Submissiveness can align with this social view, for instance when the tanks and damage players are charging into battle, the support is left behind to give healing. Whereas in the real world this can be seen as women staying back to be the caretaker and nurturer,

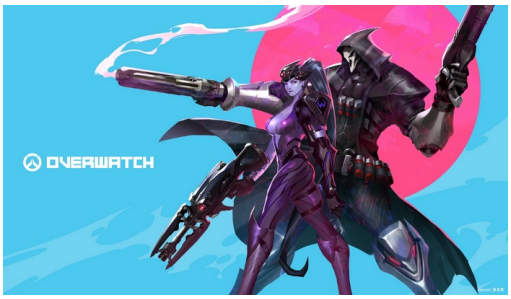
revealing that this historical stereotype is reinforced still within video games, but also within society today.

Damage

The second ‘class’ of players is damage or DPS (damage per second). These players focus on damage and would be called the ‘foot soldiers’. This role stays either in front of the tank or right beside them in order to do as much damage as possible or protect the support from being eliminated. This category is a key demonstration of how in game mechanics and visual gaze operate side by side. In order to balance a damage output to secure a win, women characters like Tracer and Widowmaker are given very low health bars, and are mechanically required to lean bodies requiring accuracy to eliminate. However, male damage heroes like Reaper and Soldier: 76 are shown with trench coats, tactical equipment, and have bigger hitboxes that require less ‘skill’ to take out. Given this manner, the validation of the hypersexuality of female lethality is on full display. Displayed is an image of Widowmaker and Reaper side by side, showing the contrast in size and skin cosmetics. The procedural rule that these characters require smaller hitboxes and less health leading to high mobility to avoid being eliminated can be apparent to both male and female playable characters. However, a comparative analysis between the male and female characters reveal differences between the display of these characters through victory poses and cosmetics. While Reaper and Soldier:76 wear tactical gear constantly, have no exotic victory poses, that cannot be said for their female counterparts. Female damage heroes, specific



to this Tracer and Widowmaker, are displayed in tight latex, high heels, and constant revealing of skin. This game's procedural trait for a slender silhouette is filtered through sexual availability and ascetic consumption. Aside from sexual tropes through the skins and cosmetics, the male gaze emerges within the camera framing on characters like Tracer. The camera focuses on her petite frame and rear end movement, through victory poses and animation style. Tracer is seen as an athletic woman with a tomboy persona, with a quirky hyperactive personality. Tracer has the lowest health as a damage player, making her character silhouette / hitbox the smallest, giving her extremely fast mobility options to escape elimination.



Tank

Tanks are the ‘heavy guns’ or the front line of the attack, these characters have more health then every other character and are framed with bigger bodies to reinforce the “big guy” role. Within the tank role there is the biggest difference of male-female playable characters. The women represented as tanks are either very masculine presented characters or are tiny fragile women characters protected by mech armor.



Junker Queen is a masculine presented tank who is only one of two characters who are presented this way, while the other is also a tank. This raises the question of what it means to be a tank. Tanks are either presented as strong masculine characters who don’t need armor to defend themselves or women with mech armor who rely on their technology or protection to remain as a

tank. On the contrary to Junker Queen, D.V.A is a heavily sexualized character within *Overwatch,* she is displayed as the ‘gamer girl’ who relies on a mech suit of armor to protect her. She has some of the most unique victory poses and animation styles.

As shown to the left, this is a victory animation and the lens is shown exactly how it would be in the game. This angle gives spectators the opportunity to look at the characters while leaping out of her giant mech suit while she does a complete 360 in the air, showing all her exaggerated features. On top of this, DVA has been ranking the top 4 ‘sexiest’ characters in every list I have checked and has ultimately become one of the poster girls for *Overwatch.* DVA is a character who ‘lore’ wise is a part of a group of other mech users called MEKA, three of which are male and two are female. Due to the popularity of this character *Overwatch* decided to introduce another member of the group and instead of choosing one of the three male counterparts of the group, they chose to add the only other female character within this group. In *Overwatch*, every character is supposed to be unique and add something new to the game based on the characters abilities and ultimate. However, this changed when DMON was added to the game. They made a character who performs almost the exact same, DMON, who also is protected by a giant mech to be added into the game. This addition raised the question of; was she added for her abilities within the game or was there a different reason. Fan-service in new characters released suggest that not only did DMON win by a landslide, but were fans just looking for a new version of DVA to fetishsize over. DMON became an official new character in August of 2026 making her the second most recent new character added. DMON is displayed in the exact same way DVA is, a tiny gamer girl who is in need of protection by a mech to make



her compatible with the tank category. Also similar to DVA, she wears tight latex suits and has exaggerated curves and hip-waist ratio. She also has the exact same victory poses and gaming winning animations where the camera follows her closely and gives a 360 full body view.

Gender

Ready to Battle vs Visual presentation

Within *Overwatch* every character is going to battle in some format whether they are tank, damage, or support. Although that should mean they all look battle ready despite the gender of the character that is not the case. Male characters in the game all follow the same trend, they fit the task of going to battle. Reinhart, a tank, has giant armor covering his entire body except for his face. Reaper and Soldier: 76, damage players, are wearing tactical gear, trench coats, and have scars on their body representing strength and battle readiness. Even male support characters like Baptiste and Wuyang have armor covering their body and tactical equipment showing readiness despite being support characters. This, however, cannot be said about the woman characters in the game. DVA, a tank referenced earlier, wears make-up and a body tight latex suit. Damage players like Widowmaker and Symmetra are wearing make-up, high heels, and have no armor covering their body at all, rather they have skin and parts of their body exposed. Lastly, the support characters like Mercy and Kiriko are wearing light palleted colors that would reveal their location immediately, have make-up, and high heels on. Seeing as this comparison shows stark differences between the male and female characters, based on who is battle ready. Female characters are subjected to looking more visibly ‘sexy’, a word often used to describe any female character in the game. Rather than making the female characters look strong, ready to fight, and prepared for the worst, *Overwatch* displays these characters as visibly consumable

rather than combat ready. On top of this, male characters in *Overwatch* are shown in a variety of ages / aging effects, like Reinhart is an old man with gray hair, Torbjorn is a short and chubby older man. There are a variety of ways age is displayed throughout the male characters, whereas all the female characters within the game are shown as young, clear skin, and 'attractive' women who share an 'ideal' body type. The body type of male characters also has a wide range, as talked about above regarding Torbjorn, while the female characters all have the same 'desired' hip-waist ratio and have exaggerated curves on both their chest and back side. This contrast demonstrates that male bodies are allowed to be functional and flawed, while their female counters are forced to maintain conventional attractiveness and uphold sexist ideas of what the female body should look like. Visual disparity is displayed through the game's cosmetics as well through victory poses and animations within the game. All characters have victory poses for when they win a game, but the pose selection is defined by whether the character is a male or female. Male character's victory poses display their weapon mastery, strength, and assertiveness. However, female characters' victory poses frequently require their backs to be arches, them facing the other direction glancing over their shoulder, or lowering their bodies to the camera. Through Mulvey's male gaze, it becomes apparent that male characters are framed as strong heroes or true soldiers, while women are displayed as hypersexualized objects remaining visibly consumable even when the game is over and they have won.

Race/Culture

Overwatch is known for its international and multicultural roster of players. Ranging from having ultimate ability voice lines in over 15 different languages and aligning at least half its characters with a culture ranging from Russian to Haitian to Japanese, it is known that there

are a wide variety of cultures recognized within the game. However, racialized body types are also displayed within the game. There are roughly 10 + characters coming from an Asian background, these female characters are framed through high-tech / racial defining aesthetics. For example, DVA and Kiriko are Japanese characters who utilize futuristic, highly advanced technology in order to stay in the fight, yet are merged with youthfulness, allowing viewers to fetish over the 'gamer girl' trope. To add on, all the characters from Japan and Korea are the smallest in height and size being made to look petite and 'sexy', conforming to the western idea that exotism is sexy. Symmetra, a character of Indian ethnicity, utilizes very futuristic light captivating technology with a cold / direct personality leaning into orientalist stereotypes of robotic precision and hyper-discipline. Sojourn is a black character whose body type is different from all others in the game. Sojourn is displayed as 'voluptuous' and has curves around her lower body, particularly her thighs and backside, that align with the trope that black women are the ideal body type to strive from, and curves lead to attractiveness. On top of the characters' looks, every character has unique voice lines that are in their native language. However, the only time this is heard from a player is when they are on the enemy team. This idea of the enemy speaking a foreign language, but your team speaking in only English, reinforces the idea that foreignness is something to be afraid of. With more than two thirds of the characters being from non-western culture, this trope that foreign voice lines are to be feared, reinforces racist stereotypes.

Fan Created Content

Porn/Graphic Images

The final section of my analysis will focus on the fan created content. *Overwatch* is notorious for its fan service and fan-made content outside of the gameplay. One defining fan made area of content is *Overwatch* porn. Within pornographic sites, *Overwatch* has its own section dedicated to fan-made porn content with characters, voice-lines, and skins being used directly from the game to create. To demonstrate the popularity, "In January 2017, Pornhub announced that "*Overwatch"* was the 11th-most searched term on their website" (Wiki, 1). According to the same site, there are over 700,00 videos created for this genre. On top of the 2017 'record', "*Overwatch* porn is a damn phenomenon. Our original report on the scene was one of our biggest stories of last year, and "*Overwatch*" ended up outranking "anal" on Pornhub's top 20 search terms of 2016" (Grayson, 1). This shows that this trend didn't only 'spike' once, but has had a continuous growth in content and remained consistent within what is trending in pornographic sites. It is widely known throughout the community that the 'top ranked' characters used within these videos are women characters who are sexualized inside and outside of the game. For example, I have searched a few different lists I could find and the top 4 characters never change. The characters at the top of the list every time are Tracer, Widowmaker, DVA, and Mercy. Each character has background lore, abilities, and catch phrases specific to them, and within the genre of porn those specific traits are capitalized on. For example, Mercy's, (described earlier in this article), role within these pornographic videos is specific to her character. She is fetishized over for being a pure, graceful, doctor type; according to Otaho, "Mercy's *overwatch* mercy porn dominance reflects the "healer" fetish—her angelic wings, medical background, and Swiss precision create unique appeal. The "heroes never die" ultimate ability takes on explicit interpretations in adult content" (Otaho, #3). By utilizing auditory male gaze, we see how characters are fetishized by the voice lines they use within the game. This

becomes more apparent when analyzing the character Ashe. She has a voice line that says “Get in there B.O.B” which directs a giant metal robot into battle (this is her ultimate ability). Othao also states that Ashe is subjected to the pornographic genre that includes explicit content using her voice line, “Her omnic butler B.O.B. provides unique scenario possibilities” (Otahao, #7). On top of the use of voice lines, fans also capitalize on victory poses. Victory poses happen at the end of the game when the winning team is being shown. Now specific to this section, Widowmaker has been ‘craved’ for not only her character design, but the angles of the camera given during the victory pose. According to Laura Mulvey’s Male Gaze, the camera angles are completely intentional. Players have used the inspiration of the victory poses and incorporated this into the porn category. Another variation of porn created by fans involved the lore of the game given by Blizzard. Every character in *Overwatch* comes with ‘background’ information giving the characters personalities, lives, and ways to be relatable to the viewers. The background lore introduces ‘gangs’ within the game aligning certain characters together based on common goals, life-styles, and what culture they come from. For example Widowmaker, in the lore, is an assassin who works closely with Reaper. This ‘slice of life’ has been adapted to the porn scenes created by the fans. The personalities given to the characters also allows players/viewers to align with characters that remind them of themselves or other realistic elements. In the terms of Widowmaker, “The overwatch porn comics featuring Widowmaker emphasize her assassin background for narrative tension” (Otaho, #2). Allowing players to relate to characters gives them a more personal connection to their characters, allowing the implications of the background to be fetishized over.



Cosplay

In the real world, cosplaying embraces embodied audience reception, allowing fans to bring these character designs into the physical / real world, breaching the gap between the digital world and real human bodies. The cosplay scene for *Overwatch* has been around for years, and continues to grow as new characters come out and the community grows. Although cosplaying can bring attention to the game and spread love in the community, that isn't always the case. Butler argues that gender is a social performance, where cosplay can be a visible form of gender performativity. When people in the real world try to play the part of characters, they are made to visibly and physically reenact the postures or body shape of the characters they decide to cosplay as that were designed by the company. The physical and mental strain to shape up to a character like tracer or widowmaker, meaning wearing 4-inch heels, matching the lean body type, and having exaggerated hip-waist ratio can be taxing because if this is done wrong, the person cosplaying can face immediate backlash or fat shaming for not matching exactly what the character looks like. For example, when searching on tiktok I ran into a cosplayer who recently experienced backlash for a cosplay, " If you ever feel like an idiot remember that there was a person that fatshamed me for my Nilou (a character in the game known as Shion) cosplay, criticized it harshly without me asking for advice and then asked me to be moots saying they 'loved my cosplay'" (Lohen). This direct real world implication raises questions about who has the right to cosplay and what type of body you must have to fit into certain characters without receiving hate. This reinforces a body standard on women, displaying if your body doesn't match a character, you are not fit to be them at all. For DVA however, cosplayers rarely use the mech that defines her as a tank, but rather focus on wearing her tight latex suit, fitting the small and

petite role of the character without her armor. This reveals that fans aren’t solely focused on her ability to perform in combat, but instead fixate on what the character looks like and her body. This reveals that fans are not focused on the game's intended purpose, combat, rather creating a new cultural blueprint that doesn’t revolve around Blizzard's designs for a character completely, but how they want her to look.

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